Exceeding national borders? Grasping everyday life in longitudinal documentaries

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Abstract: In my following lecture I will focus on a group of films that have rarely been examined under a transnational perspective before, despite presenting themselves as particularly interesting for a closer examination: longitudinal documentaries (or long docs). Before I delve deeper into why I think this is the case, I want to give a short introduction to the concept of a longitudinal documentary [...]

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Exceeding National borders? Grasping Everyday Life in longitudinal documentaries

Thank you very much for the kind introduction and also for being able to speak here today!

In my following lecture I will focus on a group of films that have rarely been examined under a transnational perspective before, despite presenting themselves as particularly interesting for a closer examination: longitudinal documentaries (or long docs). Before I delve deeper into why I think this is the case, I want to give a short introduction to the concept of a longitudinal documentary:

While Documentary Filmmakers already began to use the term longitudinal for their own projects in the early 1980s the term longitudinal documentary was prominently introduced to film studies by Richard Kilborn and his Book *Taking the Long View* in 2010.

The term has since become familiar in film and television studies and is generally used to describe series of documentaries that revisit participants over long periods of time while focusing on the everyday lives of those participants. Although this definition leaves a relatively broad spectrum of films associable with the term two film projects in particular are repeatedly considered as pivotal: *The Children of Golzow,* a German documentary series by Winfried and Barbara Junge that began in 1961 and finished in 2007; and the British *Up*-Series by Michael Apted which started in 1964 with the film *Seven Up*. Apted has since then produced a new film every seventh year, with the most recent installment being *56 Up* in 2012, making the *Up*-Series the longest running documentary in television history. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the whole film project as The *Up*-Series, although the series is more commonly known under the name of *Seven Up*, the same title as the first film of the series.

Following *Golzow* and *Up*, a variety of long docs were produced which explicitly and implicitly refer to these two 'prototypes', urging on a dispersion of longitudinal documentaries to different countries since the 1970s. Among those Rainer Hartleb's Swedish long doc *The Children of Jordbrö* (or Swedish: *Barnen fran Jordbro*) and Gilian Armstrongs Australian long doc *The Story of Kerry, Josie and Diana* can be found. The dispersion advanced further in the early 1990s, during which the idea of the *Up*-Series was adapted in order to show the everyday life of children in South Africa, Russia, Japan and the United States.

After this very short overview on the history of the long doc, I want to get back to my initial claim. So why can long docs be of particular interest in regards to a transnational perspective?

Whereas the aforementioned film projects usually take on significant roles in their respective national film histories and have as such already been partly examined in film studies, little has been said about the connections that can be found: on the level of production and reception, as well as in the aesthetics and in the overall conceptualization of the long doc format.

I argue that these connections make it possible to detach the projects from an exclusively national contextualization and to continue on to ask to what extent those projects deal with the idea of exceeding borders on different levels.

To add a short note: my intention is not to enforce the binaries of national and transnational or to contrast them in order to prefer one of them over the other. Instead, I rather want to argue that long docs, despite often been seen as depicting the everyday life of certain countries, offer a more diverse picture when examined under a broader perspective.

To exemplify this, I will predominately focus on the British *Up*-Series that I will connect to the aforementioned long docs.

In order to give an insight into the decade long history of *Up* as a documentary series it is necessary to talk about the broadcaster Granada Television and their TV program *World in Action*, within which *Seven Up* - the very first film of the series – was aired. Granada, a television broadcaster for North West England known for their left-leaning political agenda at that time, launched *World in Action* on January 7th in 1963 as a current affairs program. It was intended to oppose against already established and moderate TV-formats and to deal with both the ongoing public concerns and the rapid changes that were becoming visible in Britain during the early 1960s. In his examination of the *Up*-Series, Richard Kilborn calls *World in Action* a – and I quote - «hard-hitting investigative programme that […] was broadly sociological in its aim» (Kilborn 2010: 32). A key figure in the early days of *World in Action* was Tim Hewat, an Australian journalist who had joined Granada in 1957 after working for the *Daily Express* and was now given the job of first series editor. Michael Apted, one of two researchers for *Seven Up* at that time (and the director of every episode that followed *Seven Up*), describes Hewat's impact on the tone of the format a lot more direct than Kilborn does: «It was largely Hewat who reinvented current affairs and documentaries in the early sixties. He put tabloid journalisms on television. […]. His output was peppered with urgent and racy subject matter. […] Noicy, vulgar, quick-witted and of the moment» (Quoted in Lewis and Davis, 1991:6). It was then Hewat who came up with the idea of a program that focuses on the societal changes eminent at that time by portraying a group of seven year olds from different social backgrounds. He based his idea on the Jesuit maxim *Give me the child until he is seven and I will give you the man*.

It is notable that while *Seven Up* runs in a programme that is called *World in Action*, it is clearly framed as a project to present an insight into the daily life of the British children; moreover a *British* documentary dealing with current *British* affairs intended for a *British* audience. Nevertheless, it actually provides (at least partially) an outsider's perspective on British Society. Following the idea of Tim Hewat as an Australian, a migrant that was shocked by the rigidity of the social class system, the project seems to oppose itself to a state-friendly depiction of society. And this is no individual case: Rainer Hartleb, the director of *Barnen fran Jordbro*, has a strikingly similar vita. Hartleb, who was born in Hildburghausen, Germany, moved to Sweden as a child and later worked for Swedish Television before he came up with the idea for a long doc, examining a school class in the periphery of Stockholm. In this case as well it is a migrant perspective on a countries society.

Back to *Seven Up*. As Stella Bruzzi underlines, the first film of the *Up*-Series cannot be called a classic *World in Action* since it differs in both aesthetics and style from the usual *World in Action* program. Furthermore, it presents an almost ethnographic approach to the changing face of the British society. Ethnographic in the sense that it observes something familiar for the audience – the children of Britain – as something new and unknown. I want to take the chance and show you the first few minutes of *Seven Up*:

Clip1: Seven Up (5:00 min.)

As these first minutes show, the film is primarily concerned with the effects of the class system on those children. Shortly after a collective visit to the zoo, the narrator sets the premise of the project. And I quote: «they are like any other children, except that they come from strikingly different social backgrounds». The first few minutes go on juxtaposing the everyday lives of the children, of urban and rural, rich and poor neighborhoods, framing their lives as part of a rigid class system that the film seeks to examine further. Contrasting backgrounds, it seems, matter more than the individual life-stories.

A jump ahead in time to the mid 1980s. While the *Up*-Series had become increasingly popular in the UK over the years and developed into a well known TV-program, it was not until 1984 that the recognition started to exceed the British border. *28 Up*, the fourth installment of the series, indicates a significant turning-point. *28 Up* toned down the initial premise which dealt with the rigid class system. Instead, the film tends be increasingly observational and structures the individual stories of their protagonists more like a series of vignettes, a recounting of the individual life paths. With *28 Up* the whole series becomes, and I quote Stella Bruzzi,: «less overtly policitial and more subject-driven» (Bruzzi 2007:33).

What's interesting is that with this shift in aesthetics, the *Up*-Series began to receive significant international praise. *28 Up* was the first programme in the series that was shown in the US and it also became a hit on a variety of international film festivals. Interestingly enough, director and producer Michael Apted had moved to the United States a few years before *28 Up*.

Such a «biographical turn» again suggests connections to other long docs. The *Children of Golzow* became internationally acclaimed around 1980 with the film *Lebensläufe* - instead of focusing on a group as most preceding films did, this film focuses on nine individual portraits. As for *Barnen fran Jordbro*, the international breakthrough was made possible by an appearance in the section *International Forum* at the Berlinale in 1996 – where five original films were specifically recut in order to be shown to a festival audience.

Another notable change refers to the gender imbalance the *Up*-series was confronted with from the very beginning. While the *Up*-Series specifically focused on the male protagonists, a variety of long docs with a feminist approach started to focus on the everyday life of women. The most striking example has to be Gilian Armstrongs Australian long doc *The Story of Kerry, Josie and Diana* which started with the film *Smokes and Lollies* in 1976, focusing on the lives of three adolescent girls in the working districts of Adelaide. Although Armstrongs long doc has no direct connection to Apted's-Series, she noted that she was aware of it before starting her own project.

I want to quote Stella Bruzzi again, more specifically, her talking about the emerging feminist long docs in the 1970s: «None of these was made in direct response to *Seven Up*, but all were aware of Apted's series and the comparisons that could be made with it» (Bruzzi 2007: 18) I want to show the first minutes of *Smokes and Lollies* to again give you a little insight into the project:

Clip 2: Smokes and Lolllies [02:40 min]

What's striking is the significantly different approach in comparison to *Seven-Up*. Right from the beginning, Armstrong chooses to focus on the individual life stories instead of contrasting different social backgrounds. She instead broaches the issue of another limitation: that of girls and women in a patriarchal society. What is also interesting is how the film seems to be already aware of the fact that long docs make the passage of time visible by the means of the protagonist's faces. The film not only introduces the three girls, but offers the viewer direct visual comparisons to how they looked when they were younger. At first through photographs which are intercut into their first appearances, and then during the interviews, where these photographs are prominently arranged to catch the viewer's eye. This awareness of a strong filmic effect of long docs is hard not to link to the *Up*-Series where it was first accentuated.

Certainly, drawing these connections only within the traditions of long docs could be perceived as limiting. One must realize that these changes are also connected to general shifts in documentary filmmaking as well as to specific socio-political developments at the time. Since this would go beyond the scope of my presentation , I must refrain from digging any deeper at this stage. However, this does not contradict the approach that is concerned specifically with connecting those long docs, since they do to a certain extent communicate and react to one another. To finish this example of a British-Australian connection, Apted at least implicitly reacted to the emergence of Armstrongs long doc by including more content of the wives and girlfriends of the predominately male interviewees. Interestingly enough, this is especially true for Sue, the wife of Paul, who was part of the project ever since *Seven Up* and who emigrated to Australia shortly after the first film.

It is also no coincidence that only a few years later, in the early 1990s, Granada produced new versions of the original *Seven Up* programme for Russia, South Africa, Japan and America. While some of these differ more and some differ less from the original British version (*Age 7 in America* for example works as a, and I quote Stella Bruzzi again «American repackaging of Seven Up» [Bruzzi 2007: 18]), it is fair to say that all of them adapt the initial idea of juxtaposing the children and their social background in order to create a narrative on societal injustice.

The South African for example focuses on certain local areas around Johannesburg, while predominately observing how racial segregation has affected the life of the children. The Russian version predominately deals with the contrast between rich and poor as well as urban and rural areas and the consequences of Perestroika, while visiting children all over the former Soviet Union, reaching from Lithuania to Georgia and all the way to Kirghizia.

When looking at Up USSR and UP South Africa, what is striking is that these long docs focus on regions that are faced with drastic societal changes that, in the case of the former sovjet union, resulted in a new measurement of national borders and a diversification of national identities. While those projects begin with the initiation of those changes, it is interesting to see, that at the same time the 'Mauerfall' in Germany, a *dissolution* of a national border, changed the status of *The Children of Golzow* sustainably. It was not before this drastic historical event that Children of Golzow became one of the most valuable documentaries on the (east-)german history and one of the most valuable insights into the question of societal change from a long-term perspective.

To add, the invention of a whole new international *Up*-Franchise that is concerned with the question on how to grasp everyday life in different countries deserves a closer examination that I have to refrain from right now. It has to be said that the development of Granada Television – a former regional broadcaster which is now part of the huge global TV-Network ITV that feeds TVs with content all around the world is especially intriguing in this case. But a case for another presentation, I am afraid.

To get back to my initial question: can long docs be proven to be viable objects for debates on the (trans-)national? I hope by showing some connections between certain long docs, I was able to show you that indeed, for some aspects they can be. And while until now long docs have predominately been examined as national phenomena, I hope I was able to show you that it can be truly intriguing to detach them from such an exclusive perspective – and to connect them to a broader frame. Thank you!